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Catherine Nesci, *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses : Les femmes et la ville à l'époque romantique*. Grenoble: Ellug, 2007. 430 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. 32€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-84310-150-2.

Review by Denise Z. Davidson, Georgia State University.

Most readers of this review are probably familiar with the image and concept of the *flâneur*, the “male stroller” who consumes the sites of the city as he walks. As theorized by Walter Benjamin in the 1930s, the classic flâneur of the early and mid nineteenth century symbolized the transformations of modern, urban life. In Baudelaire’s writings of the 1860s, which inspired Benjamin’s analysis, the flâneur is associated with bohemian Paris. He was an artist and an intellectual, an upper-class man of leisure, a dandy and a connoisseur of the pleasures of the city. In *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses*, Catherine Nesci focuses on an earlier period, when the flâneur took a slightly different form, and was more an observer and chronicler of all that he saw than an artist transforming it through his creative impulses. Nonetheless an erotic component was as central to these earlier flâneurs as to later versions: while strolling, observing, and consuming sights, the flâneur objectified all that he saw, especially women.

It is this erotic component, along with the idea that flâneurs are by definition male, which has inspired much feminist scholarship on *la flânerie*. Can there be a female flâneur, or “flâneuse”? Since it is assumed that women do not, or at least did not, have the power to objectify the men (and women?) whose paths they crossed in the streets, many scholars have argued that the flâneuse could not exist. According to this argument, women who appeared in public spaces and strolled on city streets lacked the objectifying power of the male gaze.<sup>[1]</sup> They could only be turned into objects of the gaze, and thus any incursion into city streets left them vulnerable to this objectifying male gaze and to accusations that they were not “respectable” if they were seen leaving the private spaces where bourgeois women were supposed to spend their lives. And what about those working women who found themselves on city streets for either work or pleasure? They became, in the literary representations of the early nineteenth century, the classic *grisette*, the working-class girlfriend of young, upper-class men. Thus the question of the flâneur, and his encounter with the city and its inhabitants intersects many of the central problems and questions of modern urban life: public versus private, consumption and urban pleasures, sexuality, class relations, and relations between men and women.

Nesci’s thorough and thoughtful analysis incorporates all of these themes and many more, and illuminates through analysis of literary sources the varied significance of *la flânerie* as well as how three exceptional women tried, in their own unique ways, to empower themselves by taking on the role of “flâneuse.” So can women be flâneuses? Nesci’s answer seems to be yes, but she insists that the flâneuse necessarily differs from the flâneur. Through their observations and writing, the women Nesci focuses upon assumed the subject position of the flâneur, but they simultaneously transformed it, making it correspond to their own needs as women and as social commentators. They insisted on their right to observe and to reflect upon all they saw. To do so, however, they needed some kind of mask or camouflage to protect them from the series of dangers presented to elite women roaming city streets. They also accomplished different things with their gaze. Rather than eroticizing urban life, their gazes took on a social function, drawing attention to the misery and inequalities they saw around them. Thus, for Nesci, the flâneuse unquestionably existed, but she was not simply a female version of the flâneur, she was an altogether different species. A huge literature exists on the flâneur, and Nesci has clearly read widely, building upon earlier analyses to construct her own. One surprising omission from her

bibliography, however, is the sociologist David Harvey, one of the most important theorists of nineteenth-century urban life and the flâneur.<sup>[2]</sup> Work such as Harvey's could have helped Nesci to ground her literary analysis of flâneurs and flâneuses more in the lived reality of early nineteenth-century urban dwellers.

Nesci's book is divided into five parts. Part one examines panoramic literature with a focus on two works: *Paris, ou le livre des cent-et-un* (1831) and *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1840-1841). She argues here that a clear evolution took place during these years regarding the flâneur. In the earlier publication, the flâneur observed and consumed what he saw, and in the process felt empowered. In the parallel text from 1840, the flâneur emerged as an artist and an intellectual who also analyzed and dissected the scenes he observed: "Passant de l'observation à l'analyse, le flâneur va au-delà du visible pour découvrir l'énigme des êtres et des choses, car de ces secrets, il est dépositaire à l'égal de Dieu" (p. 69). In part two of her book, Nesci moves to a discussion of the Balzacian flâneur, with most of her attention paid to the story *Ferragus, chef des Dévorants* (1833), the first part of *Histoire des Treize*. Much of Nesci's analysis of the story focuses on Balzac's obsession with bodies, particularly that of the grisette, Ida Gruget, who commits suicide.

Nesci's analysis emphasizes the dual function of Ida's body in Balzac's story: "le corps de la grisette est bien double: corps habité par les nouvelles normes de la société parisienne...; mais aussi corps de plaisir et de passion, corps en mouvement dans l'espace urbain, corps de l'ivresse populaire, corps au travail. Corps productif en ceci que la grisette est couturière en corsets" (p. 107). This passage exemplifies Nesci's ability to tease out meaning from her material, in this case Balzac's portrayal of this female character and her death. Nesci wraps up her analysis of the body in *Ferragus* with a discussion of how that female body relates to the flâneur. Balzac's story "est le récit naissant de la flânerie et du trajet de l'énigme dans la ville, récit qui débouche sur la constitution d'une nouvelle forme narrative offrant un savoir neuf sur la société postrévolutionnaire. Ce récit ... fait revivre l'histoire de ces femmes vaincues, victimes de la volonté de voir et de savoir" (p. 159). Balzac depicts women who transgress the boundaries of "respectable" behavior as victims, victims of the male desire to see and know all. The remainder of Nesci's book draws our attention to women who consciously transgressed such boundaries, who refused to be turned into passive victims of the male gaze, and in the process created empowering subject positions for themselves as flâneuses and writers.

The last parts of Nesci's study focus on three female writers: Delphine de Girardin, George Sand, and Flora Tristan, each of whom created masks that permitted them to become flâneuses. In the case of Delphine de Girardin, she used an aristocratic male pseudonym for the accounts of Parisian life she published in the feuilleton section of the daily newspaper *La Press*. George Sand also (very famously) created an alternate identity for herself in both her pseudonym and her cross-dressing. Finally, Flora Tristan similarly hid some aspects of her identity (her illegitimate birth and her marital status) and constructed new ones (her aristocratic Peruvian connections) as she traveled to the Americas in search of her paternal family, and later as she traveled to England and around France. Through these different kinds of masking, these women found ways to act as flâneuses. They roamed city streets observing all that they saw around them, and they used their observations to create identities for themselves as writers. As this point of creating female subjects through their lives and writings is central to Nesci's argument, I was disappointed that she did not engage with some of the recent historical literature on the self.<sup>[3]</sup> Again, engagement with this material might have provided a broader context in which to frame her analysis. Still, Nesci's research is certainly laudatory as she engages with scholarship in a variety of disciplines: literature, art history, sociology, and history.

Part three of *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses* examines the career and writings of Delphine de Girardin. Girardin, who was already a well known poet during the Restoration under her maiden name of Delphine Gay, moved into journalism after marrying the newspaper owner Emile de Girardin.<sup>[5]</sup> Nesci begins by discussing two of Delphine de Girardin's short stories, which

were published as she was making the transition from poetry to prose and from sentimental topics to more carnivalesque accounts of urban life. In *Le Lorgnon* (1831), Girardin uses the symbol of the eyepiece to refer to the ocular powers of the aristocratic main character, Edouard de Lorville. Lorville is the classic flâneur who visits all the cultural sights of the capital, observing “les moeurs” and figuring out the secrets of his neighbors. In *La Canne de M. de Balzac*, Girardin parodies the classic Balzacian “flâneur artiste” through another male character, Tancredi, whose “canne merveilleuse représente pour le beau jeune homme (et la conteuse) l’attribut phallique du maître de l’ironie et de la satire social” (p. 191).

The second chapter in part three focuses on Girardin’s feuilleton articles “Le Courier de Paris” published in *La Press*. The feuilleton, the bottom part of the pages, was reserved for “lighter” information, particularly accounts of Parisian amusements and fashions.[6] Here, too, Girardin appropriated the voice of a male, aristocratic flâneur—the vicomte Charles de Launay—to describe Parisian goings-on, and Nesci focuses on this masking and all that it allowed Girardin to accomplish. While these articles on Parisian life and fashions benefited from an omniscient male gaze, at the same time “les détails de la toilette féminine trahissent l’identité sexuée de la femme auteure sous le travesti masculin” (p. 201). Nesci draws attention to the social categories that Girardin’s detailed observations of fashion tried to lay bare: “De la coquetterie féminine dépendent l’enchantement de Paris comme le spectacle sans cesse renouvelé d’une élite social entretenant le délicieux décor de sa distinction.... La femme ornement conserve les différences matérielles et symboliques entre les classes et les sexes” (p. 221). Girardin used her position as an “invisible flâneuse” [4] to reflect on the make up of Parisian society and on women’s real and symbolic roles in building social distinctions.

Part four of Nesci’s book turns to George Sand, perhaps the clearest example of the “invisible flâneuse” and literary masking as she donned male dress and a male pseudonym to gain access to spaces she would otherwise have been unable to enter. Nesci focuses on two works by Sand: *Histoire de ma vie* and *Horace*. In the first, Sand seemed to relish her new power as a flâneuse: “La découverte jubilatoire du monde par la flâneuse travestie donne ainsi naissance à la création artistique: la ville se fait paysage et espace de la rêverie” (pp. 262-263). As a flâneur, who was really an invisible flâneuse, Sand was neither an object of knowledge nor an object of desire. Instead, she turned herself into a social commentator, using her subject position as a flâneuse to draw attention to the misery she saw around her. In *Horace*, Sand “donne une âme au petit peuple du Mansarde” (p. 296). Sand tells much of her story from the perspective of Marthe, a grisette who goes on to a successful career as an actress, combining a bohemian lifestyle with motherhood. According to Nesci, Sand refused to oppose “la bohème” and “la bourgeoisie” and as such was proposing new social norms.

The last part of *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses* focuses on Flora Tristan’s two early publications, *Nécessité de faire bon accueil aux femmes étrangères* (1835) and *Pérégrinations d’une paria* (1838). Unlike Girardin, who used the voice of a male narrator to give her the right to speak and act as a flâneur, Tristan used these non-fictional accounts of her travels to draw attention to the difficulties faced by women and to emphasize her right to travel and to write *as* a woman. Both serve Nesci’s argument that Tristan was a “conscientious traveler:” the first describes the atrocious treatment she received when traveling by herself in France; the second describes her trip to South America and all that she encountered en route and once settled in Peru.

Tristan fits the “masking” theme of Nesci’s study as she had to hide some aspects of her identity while constructing others. Forced into an early marriage by her widowed mother, Tristan left her husband and returned to using her maiden name, thus rejecting her legal position as a wife and instead choosing to emphasize her background as the daughter of a Peruvian aristocrat. When she traveled to Peru in search of her father’s family, she received a cold response, yet still formed a close relationship with a female cousin, who permitted her to gain access to the intimate spaces and thoughts of Peruvian women. When her paternal uncle renounced his ties to her, she left her family’s home town and settled on her

own in Lima. One of the famous passages of her *Pérégrinations* focuses on the dress of women in Lima, which included a kind of veil that completely covered their bodies and faces, leaving only one eye visible. Tristan remarked on the empowering aspects of this concealing dress, which permitted these women to roam the streets freely and to have greater access to public space than European women; they even attended sessions of the Congress of Lima. Tristan herself seemed to recognize the power of the “invisible flâneuse.” Upon her return to Europe she would more self-consciously empower herself as a flâneuse and writer documenting, among other things, the horrific poverty and filth she observed in the Irish quarter of London. [7]

The five parts of this book add up to a brilliant analysis of literary representations of the flâneur and of how women writers of the early nineteenth century consciously sought to appropriate the flâneur’s subject position. The book also contains numerous illustrations that help to reinforce the author’s arguments, including a set of images of George Sand that depict various forms and degrees of her “perplexing” androgyny (p. 249) as well as some color reproductions of paintings that help us to “see” the invisibility of female strollers. Though the women writers under discussion were anything but typical, as Nesci herself admits (p. 398), through their examples, one can imagine less exceptional women finding less exceptional ways to claim the right to traverse public spaces, to exercise the power of their gazes, and to comment upon what they saw. They may not have been known in their own time, and their commentaries may have been far less articulate than the three women examined in this book, but it was still no doubt possible to be a flâneuse. And, as Nesci explains in her concluding paragraph, women played an often neglected role in the invention of “une culture urbaine de la flânerie” (p. 400).

#### NOTES:

[1] I discuss some of the issues revolving around women seeing and being seen, and cite much of the relevant literature, in “Making Society ‘Legible’: People-Watching in Paris after the French Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 28 (Spring 2005), 265-296. Sharon Marcus’s recent work drawing attention to the homoerotic component of the female gaze shifts the terrain of these debates. See her *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[2] A recent publication pulls together new and previously published essays on Paris, including lengthy analyses of Balzac’s depictions of the city and *la flânerie*: David Harvey, *Paris: Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[3] Two relevant works are Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women became Modern* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001) and Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[4] The phrase comes from Janet Wolff, “The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” in *Feminine Sentences, Essays on Women and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). An insightful critique of Wolff’s argument appears in Elizabeth Wilson, “The Invisible Flâneur,” *New Left Review* 191 (Jan.-Feb. 1992), 90-110.

[5] For more on Delphine Gay/Delphine de Girardin, see Cheryl A. Morgan, “The Death of a Poet: Delphine Gay’s Romantic Makeover,” *Symposium* 53 (winter 2000):249-260. Nesci builds upon Morgan’s analysis for her own.

[6] On the feuilleton and the July Monarchy press, see Marie-Eve Thérenty, *1836, l’an I de l’ère médiatique* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2001).

[7] Excerpts of Tristan’s writings appeared in translation in *Flora Tristan, Utopian Feminist: Her Travel Diaries and Personal Crusade*, ed. Doris and Paul Beik (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

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